UNIT 6 PHRONESIS OF ARISTOTLE

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- Distinguish between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom (phronesis)
- Understand various kinds of virtues according to Aristotle.
- Distinguish between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom (phronesis)
- Explain the meaning of phronesis as explicated in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics.
- Discuss various important factors coming under the concept of phronesis.

- Know that practical wisdom is a virtue, not art.
- Analyze that practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge.
- Explore the relation of phronesis to other virtues.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This Unit introduces to you the concept of phronesis as expounded by Aristotle in Book VI of Nicomachean Ethics. Virtue comes about by choosing a mean between vicious extremes according to the right principle. This is only as helpful as telling a sick person that health comes about by choosing medicine according to what a doctor might prescribe. That is, we have no helpful understanding of virtue until we learn what this right principle is. But what is this right reason, and by what standard (horos) is it to be determined? Aristotle says that unless we answer that question, we will be none the wiser-just as a student of medicine will have failed to master his subject if he can only say that the right medicines to administer are the ones that are prescribed by medical expertise, but has no standard other than this. Hence Aristotle makes an enquiry into various kinds of intellectual virtues. To learn about the right principle mentioned above, we must examine the intellectual virtues. Phronesis is said to an intellectual virtue.

6.3 THEORETICAL WISDOM AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

Aristotle distinguishes between two types of wisdom, namely, theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. Theoretical knowledge, for Aristotle, is "scientific knowledge, combined with intuitive reason, of the things that are highest by nature" (1141b, Nicomachean Ethics, VI). Theoretical wisdom involves knowledge of necessary, scientific, first principles and propositions that can be logically deduced from them. But Aristotle could see the limitations of theoretical wisdom as mere possession of theoretical knowledge does not necessarily make a person practically wise. Phronesis or practical wisdom, for Aristotle, is the discovery of the link which was missing in theoretical wisdom. In book VI of Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle claims, "This is why we say Anaxagoras, Thales, and men like

them have philosophic but not practical wisdom, when we see them ignorant of what is to their own advantage, and why we say that they know things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but useless; namely, because it is not human goods they seek" (1141a, Nicomachean Ethics, VI). Thus for Aristotle, practical wisdom requires knowing in general, how to live.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) According to Aristotle, phronesis is an intellectual virtue. (True/ False)

b) Phronesis is scientific knowledge. (True/ False)

c) Phronesis is theoretical wisdom. (True/ False)

Q2: In which book of Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle deals with the concept of phronesis?

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Activity 6.1

- What is the relevance of being practically wise in our day to day life?

Ans: .....

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6.4 KINDS OF INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE

According to Aristotle, the soul is divided into a rational part and an

irrational part. The rational part can be further divided into a contemplative part, which studies the invariable truths of science and mathematics; and a calculative part, which deals with the practical matters of human life or it can be said that the calculative part grasps variable things. Right reasoning with respect to the contemplative intellect corresponds to truth. With the practical intellect, right reasoning corresponds to proper deliberation that leads to making the right choice.

Aristotle classified virtues into two kinds: moral and intellectual virtues. Moral virtues, we learn through habit and practice, but intellectual virtues, we learn through instruction. Aristotle divides intellectual virtues into five. Through these virtues one can arrive at the ultimate truth. In the Posterior Analytics and Nicomachean Ethics he identified five intellectual virtues. These five virtues are separated into three classes:

a) Theoretical

- Sophia: wisdom (rational intuition and scientific knowledge directed toward the highest and most valuable objects)
- Episteme: scientific knowledge of objects that are necessary and unchanging
- Nous: rational intuition of first principles or self-evident truths

b) Practical

- Phronesis: practical wisdom/prudence

c) Productive

- Techne: craft knowledge, art, skill

6.5 THREE KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE

For a clear understanding of the concept of phronesis we need to have detailed grasping of the following three kinds of knowledge propounded by Aristotle:

6.5.1 Episteme (Scientific knowledge)

Aristotle uses the word 'episteme' to mean scientific knowledge. Object of scientific knowledge is of necessity. This means that scientific knowledge, episteme, is of what cannot be otherwise, i.e., necessary and eternal truths.

6.5.2 Techne (Skill and craft knowledge)

The Greek work Techne is translated to craftsmanship, craft, or art. People are not often aware of the knowledge they possess or how it can be valuable to others. This kind of knowledge is not easy to share; you have to learn it yourself by practice. A common example is the ability to ride a bicycle if you have an easy written instruction set on how to ride a bicycle please send me a email so can I forward it to my four year old son. This type of knowledge is of very common in software development and comes with experience.

6.5.3 Phronesis (Practical wisdom)

Phronesis means practical wisdom in Greek. Aristotle distinguishes between sophia and phronesis. Sophia (translated to wisdom) is the ability to think well about the nature of the world, discovering systems why the world is the way it is. Sophia is the ability to find universal truths and theories.

6.6 MEANING OF PHRONESIS IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

Phronesis is a Greek word for a type of wisdom or intelligence. It is more specifically a type of wisdom associated with practical things. It requires an ability to discern how or why to act virtuously and encourage practical virtue, excellence of character, in others. In ancient Greek philosophy phronesis was a common topic for discussion. Due to the practical character of phronesis, it is not generally translated as wisdom or intelligence. Phronesis is therefore often translated as "practical wisdom."

Practical wisdom (phronesis) is an intellectual virtue, a virtue of

practical reasoning. Aristotle draws a distinction between theoretical reason and practical reason. Roughly, theoretical reason investigates what we cannot change and aims at the truth. Practical reason investigates what we can change and aims at making good choices. To make good choices, not only must our reasoning be correct, but we must also have the right desires. The person with practical wisdom deliberates well about how to live a good life. So practical wisdom is 'a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human good'. (1140b, Nicomachean Ethics)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) Contemplative part of the rational soul studies the invariable truths of science and mathematics. (True/False)

b) With the practical intellect, right reasoning corresponds to proper deliberation that leads to making the right choice. (true/false)

c) There are five kinds of intellectual virtues according to Aristotle. (True/ False)

d) Episteme is knowledge of skill and craft. (True/ False)

e) Techne is scientific knowledge. (True/False)

Q4: How many parts of soul are there according to Aristotle? What are they?

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Q5: 5. Define phronesis according to Aristotle.

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Activity 6.2

- How is practical wisdom different from other intellectual virtues?

Ans: .....

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6.7 PRACTICAL WISDOM INVOLVES FOUR CHIEF FACTORS

Aristotle claims that practical wisdom differs from other sorts of knowledge both because of its complexity and its practical nature. Practical wisdom is said to involve the following factors

1. **Knowing the telos of a role or objective:** While every person has the general telos of eudaimonia , each individual also has a telos that is unique to his/her roles in life. The telos of a teacher is to help students learn and enrich their minds. The teacher must ensure that he is exerting his best possible endeavour to the students. We can see here the application of the concept of final cause propounded by Aristotle. Phronesis therefore is said to be knowledge of how to secure the ends of human life.

2. **Perception:** Practical wisdom, for Aristotle is related to particular situations. To know how to act in a particular situation, we need to minutely perceive and understand the circumstances before us. Therefore doing is always doing some particular action. Aristotle cites an example to show the relevance of knowledge of particular. If a man knows that light meat is digestible and wholesome but does not know

which sorts of meal is light; he is very less likely to end up with something healthy. It is to be remembered here that the perception that practical wisdom involves is to be distinguished from (i) the perception exercised by the five senses and (ii) the perception that a given figure is a triangle. Perception of practical wisdom resembles (ii) more than (i).

3. **Experience:** In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle states that "practical wisdom is also of particulars, which come to be known as a result of experience, but a young person is inexperienced: a long period of time creates experience." Aristotle firmly believed that practical wisdom could be gained only through experience. For Aristotle practical wisdom is a skill like carpentry or masonry. You can't just read a book about carpentry and expect to become a master carpenter. You have to go to a shop and start working with tools and wood to be a carpenter. So carpentry is associated with practical wisdom. The more decision one makes, the greater will be the capacity to be practically wise. Thus learning from one's experiences is directly associated with practical wisdom.

4. **Deliberative skills:** According to Aristotle, "the person skilled in deliberating would in general also be practically wise." The heart of practical wisdom is deliberation. Practical wisdom requires that we deliberate with ourselves the best course of action to take in a given situation. It's a skill that we become more adept at through experience.

Deliberation is the application of appropriate reason, through choice, to current situations. Deliberation and choice, taken together, constitute the application and exercise of practical wisdom. Deliberation and choice are thus the bridge between episteme and action. Aristotle remarks that the "origin of action is choice," and that choice is "desire and reasoning with a view to an end"(1139a Nicomachean Ethics). Through choice, reason enters into action in the context of character, desire and situation. Choice involves the following cognitive components - intuition, understanding and judgment. Intuition is our ability to grasp rational principles, understanding is our ability to possible applications to experience, and judgment our ability to

characterize a given set of particulars with the appropriate set of principles. Intuition, understanding, and judgment together form the building blocks for Aristotle's account of phronesis, or practical wisdom. Phronesis is thus our capacity for rational deliberation that results in effective action. It is our complex capacity to exercise these abilities in a coordinated fashion; our ability to make good choices, with good judgment, according to good principles, that result in good action.

Practical wisdom thus involves general knowledge, particular knowledge, ability to reason towards a choice, and an ability to act on that choice. Aristotle thus lays out the skills and attributes a person needs to develop in order to become practically wise.

6.8 PRACTICAL WISDOM IS A VIRTUE, NOT ART

There is a distinction between phronesis (practical wisdom) and art. Aristotle says that there is such a thing as excellence in art, but there is no such thing as excellence in practical wisdom. In art intentional error is preferable, but in case of practical wisdom an unintentional mistake to a deliberate one is preferred. Aristotle states that reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make. Art is the knowledge of how to make things, e.g., architecture is an art, since it is a state concerned with making something whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made. One similarity between art and practical wisdom is that both are concerned with variable, which means that they are not concerned with something necessary, but are concerned with the things that can be otherwise.

Aristotle carefully distinguished doing from making because, while doing can involve any action from deliberation to random reactions, art (techne) is well developed science-like bodies of knowledge, such as architecture and cooking, that guide the use of reason in poeisis, or making things. Techne, or "reasoned states of capacity to make," (1140a, Nicomachean Ethics) have several episteme-like characteristics: they follow

accepted practices, develop reproducible strategies, and offer the promise of predictable results. Cooking is a good example of a techne. If a cook follows a particular recipe, according to the appropriate specifications, then something like the anticipated cake should result. Techne is not episteme because the links between recipes and cakes are not as necessary as the links between theorems and triangles. Still, the goal of a techne is to make the "knowledge of things made" as epistemic as possible.

6.9 PRACTICAL WISDOM IS NOT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Scientific knowledge is said to be a state of capacity to demonstrate. Demonstration is the activity of marshalling epistemic knowledge into proper argument forms to draw invariable conclusions. Much of Aristotle's logical writing, e. g., Prior Analytics is dedicated to developing the rules and forms for valid argument. However, the knowledge that guides action involves deliberation rather than demonstration because it refers to things whose causes are variable rather than invariable. Here Aristotle relies implicitly upon validity of argument form to describe practical reasoning. Demonstration, which guides scientific knowledge, proceeds from invariable first principles (causes) though premises to conclusions. Since practical reasoning proceeds from variable (or uncertain) first principles, then the conclusions derived from uncertain premises will also be uncertain - "all such things might be actually otherwise" (1140a, Nicomachean Ethics). If demonstration is not a practical option, then deliberation, the comparison, sharing and testing of hypotheses about possible action, must characterize the activity of practical reasoning. The role of deliberation is already mentioned previously in the present chapter.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6: State whether the following statements are true or false:

a) Phronesis does not involve knowledge of telos of role. (True/ False)

b) Phronesis can only be gained through experience according to Aristotle. (True/ False)

c) Phronesis is associated with particular situations. (True/False)

d) Practical wisdom requires that we deliberate with ourselves the best course of action to take in a given situation. (True/False)

Q7: Why is Phronesis said to be knowledge of how to secure the ends of human life?

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Q8: What are the four chief factors coming under the concept of practical wisdom?

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Q9: What is the difference between demonstration and deliberation according to Aristotle?

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Q10: How is art different from Phronesis according to Aristotle?

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Activity 6.3

- How is deliberation associated with practical wisdom?

Ans: .....

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6.10 RELATION BETWEEN PRACTICAL WISDOM AND POLITICAL WISDOM

According to Aristotle, practical wisdom and political wisdom have two aspects, an overarching or controlling one (legislative wisdom, and concern for the general good respectively), and a narrower one. For political wisdom, the narrower one is politics in the everyday sense, i.e., doing things. For practical wisdom, the narrower aspect is concerned with the agent's own good. Practical wisdom is identified with that form of it which is concerned with a man himself-with the individual; and this is known by the general name 'practical wisdom'.

Aristotle contends that practical and political wisdom are closely related, but not identical. "Political wisdom and practical wisdom are the same state of mind, but their essence is not the same" (1141a, Nicomachean Ethics). By this Aristotle means that practical and political wisdom share the same deliberative process, but differ in their domains of exercise. Practical wisdom is concerned with the good of the individual and political wisdom with the good of the state. Aristotle notes the different dimensions of political wisdom: "one is called household management, another legislation, the third politics, and of the latter on part is called deliberative and the other judicial" (1141b, Nicomachean Ethics). The ability to successfully conduct legislation and politics is the work of the statesman, or the leader, and requires the exercise of political wisdom. Under the heading of practical wisdom, Aristotle thus distinguishes between personal practical wisdom and political practical wisdom.

6.11 RELATION OF PRACTICAL WISDOM TO OTHER VIRTUES

Practical wisdom is related to virtue. Here a question can be posed: living a good life is a matter of being good, and this involves the virtues. So what is the necessity of practical wisdom? The answer can be formulated in this way: the virtues (justice, courage, generosity, etc.) set our ends. Because

we are virtuous, we aim at the good life, and we have a reliable conception of what this is (it involves justice, courage, generosity, etc.). But that isn't enough to live a good life, because it doesn't tell us what is good (courageous, etc.) in this particular situation. For that, we need practical wisdom to identify the (constitutive) means to our virtuous ends.

Aristotle draws a distinction between acting in accordance with a virtue and doing a fully virtuous action. A fully virtuous action is one in which the agent knows what they are doing and chooses the act for its own sake. Both this knowledge and this kind of choice depend on having practical wisdom. The knowledge involves understanding what is good in this situation, and choice depends upon deliberation, and good deliberation involves practical wisdom. So acting virtuously requires practical wisdom.

Aristotle draws a distinction between 'natural' virtue and 'full' virtue. He allows that we can have good dispositions from birth, e.g. someone might be naturally kind. But this doesn't amount to 'full virtue'. A naturally kind child may not fully comprehend the nature of his/her action, and may become kind for some wrong reason. Without practical wisdom, we cannot possess full virtue. Practical wisdom involves having general knowledge about what is good. This depends upon being virtuous, because what appears good to someone depends on their character traits. So on Aristotle's theory, we become both good and practically wise together.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q11: How is practical wisdom different from political wisdom?

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Q12: How does Aristotle draw a distinction between acting in accordance with a virtue and doing a fully virtuous action?

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6.12 LET US SUM UP

- Aristotle defines a virtue as 'a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it'. So what is practical wisdom (phronesis)? Phronesis is one of the five intellectual virtues according to Aristotle.

- Practical wisdom is not theoretical wisdom. There is a difference between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. Whereas theoretical wisdom is often abstracted from action, practical wisdom is the kind of knowledge and capacity that guides action.

- There are five intellectual virtues according to Aristotle. They are: 1. Sophia: wisdom (rational intuition and scientific knowledge directed toward the highest and most valuable objects), 2. Episteme: scientific knowledge of objects that are necessary and unchanging, 3.Nous: rational intuition of first principles or self-evident truths, 4. Phronesis: Practical knowledge, 5. Techne: Craft and skill.

- There are three kinds of knowledge according to Aristotle: Episteme (scientific knowledge), Techne(craft and skill knowledge), phronesis (practical wisdom).

- Phronesis, or practical wisdom, refers to an individual's capacity to discern what is worth doing together with the ability to get it done, a "reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human good" (1140b, Nicomachean Ethics).Practical reason investigates what we can change and aims at making good choices. Phronesis is the ability to realize how a specific goals or value is reached. Phronesis includes aspects of a situation, critical analytical reflection and for scrutinizing knowledge systems, practices and impacts of goals which easily are take for granted.

- Phronesis is said to incorporate four chief factors within it. They are:

a. Phronesis is said to be knowledge of how to secure the ends of human life.

b. Phronesis is associated with the knowledge of particulars.

c. Phronesis is gained only through experience.

d. The person skilled in deliberating would in general be regarded to be practically wise.

- Aristotle says that phronesis is a virtue and not art. For Aristotle, there is such a thing as excellence in art, but there is no such thing as excellence in practical wisdom. In art intentional error is preferable, but in case of practical wisdom an unintentional mistake to a deliberate one is preferred. Aristotle states that reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make.

- Practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is demonstrative, while practical wisdom is deliberative. The knowledge that guides action involves deliberation rather than demonstration; and practical wisdom is related to action.

- According to Aristotle, practical wisdom and political wisdom, though they are connected, are not identical. By this Aristotle means that practical and political wisdom share the same deliberative process, but differ in their domains of exercise. Practical wisdom is concerned with the good of the individual, while political wisdom is with the good of the state.

- Practical wisdom involves having general knowledge about what is good. This depends upon being virtuous, because what appears good to someone depends on their character traits. So on Aristotle's theory, we become both good and practically wise together.



6.13 FURTHER READING

1) Aristotle (2009), Nicomachean Ethics, trans. David Ross, Oxford University Press, New York.

2) Hughes, J. G. (2001), Aristotle on Ethics, Routledge, New York.
3) Hursthouse, Rosalind (2001), On Virtue Ethics, Oxford University Press, New York.
4) Guthrie, W. K. C. (1990), A History of Greek Philosophy, volume VI, Cambridge University Press.
5) McEvilley, Thomas (2002), The Shape of Ancient Thought, Motilal Banrasidas.
6) Taylor, Richard (2002), An Introduction to Virtue Ethics, Amherst: Prometheus Books

6.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: a) True, b) False, c) False

Ans. to Q. No. 2. In book VI of Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle deals with the concept of phronesis.

Ans. to Q. No.3. a) True, b) True, c) True, d) False, e) False

Ans. to Q. No 4. According to Aristotle, soul is divided into two parts: rational and irrational.

Ans. to Q. No 5. Aristotle defines practical wisdom as 'a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human good'. (1140b, Nicomachean Ethics)

Ans. to Q. No 6. a) False, b) True, c) True, d) True

Ans. to Q. No 7. While every person has the general telos of eudaimonia, each individual also has a telos that is unique to his/her roles in life. The telos of a teacher is to help students learn and enrich their minds. The teacher must ensure that he is exerting his best possible endeavour to the students. We can see here the application of the concept of final cause propounded by Aristotle. Phronesis therefore is said to be knowledge of how to secure the ends of human life.

Ans. to Q. No 8. Phronesis involves the following chief factors

a. Phronesis is said to be knowledge of how to secure the ends of human life.
b. Phronesis is associated with the knowledge of particulars.

c. Phronesis is gained only through experience.

d. The person skilled in deliberating would in general be regarded to be practically wise.

Ans. to Q. No 9. Practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is demonstrative, while practical wisdom is deliberative. The knowledge that guides action involves deliberation rather than demonstration; and practical wisdom is related to action.

Ans. to Q. No 10. Aristotle says that phronesis is a virtue and not art. For Aristotle, there is such a thing as excellence in art, but there is no such thing as excellence in practical wisdom. In art intentional error is preferable, but in case of practical wisdom an unintentional mistake to a deliberate one is preferred. Aristotle states that reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make.

Ans. to Q. No 11. Practical wisdom is concerned with the good of the individual, and political wisdom with the good of the state.

Ans. to Q. No 12. Aristotle draws a distinction between acting in accordance with a virtue and doing a fully virtuous action. A fully virtuous action is one in which the agent knows what they are doing and chooses the act for its own sake. Both this knowledge and this kind of choice depend on having practical wisdom. The knowledge involves understanding what is good in this situation, and choice depends upon deliberation, and good deliberation involves practical wisdom. So acting virtuously requires practical wisdom.

6.15 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very short Questions

Q1: What is the literal meaning of the term 'phronesis'?

Q2: Why is it said that phronesis is practical wisdom and not theoretical wisdom?

Q3: Why is Phronesis said to be an intellectual virtue?

Q4: Define episteme.

Q5: Define Techne.

Q6: Why is phronesis not said to be an art?

Q7: Why is phronesis is not scientific knowledge?

B. Short Questions (Write in about 100-150 words)

Q1: Write short note on Phronesis

Q2: Write a short note on three kinds of knowledge according to Aristotle.

Q3: Distinguish between phronesis and art

Q4: Distinguish between Phronesis and political wisdom.

C. Long Questions (Write in about 300-500 words)

Q1: What are the different dimensions of the Aristotle's concept of Phronesis?

Q2: Describe various factors coming under the concept of Phronesis.

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